

SPEECH MADE TO DOWNTOWN ROTARY CLUB

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THE CUBAN REFUGEE SITUATION IN DADE COUNTY

May 2, 1963

A little over two years ago----when I first came to this job----people in the community told me we were sitting on a powder-keg that might blow up any minute. 18 months ago, when I last spoke to this group, I was told the same thing. All during the last 12 months, and once again during the Pepper-Fascell hearings, I heard local labor leaders and other concerned individuals voice the same cry.

However, from where I sit, and from what I see, I've never believed these cries, and right here today I want to say to you, as members of the leading civic organization in this community, that we have not been, and we are not now sitting on a powder keg because of the Cuban refugees living in our midst.

I am really not here to educate you. I bring you information which I hope will enable you to educate yourselves, if that is your desire.

I am not here to plead the special cause of the Cuban refugee, or to defend those who are defenseless. I bring you facts, not fiction, which I hope will enable you to decide whether their cause is a just one, and is deserving of your understanding and active support.

The moment the Cuban crisis erupted recently, Fidel Castro, slammed the door through which thousands of Cubans had been fleeing their land since 1959. Planes which had been flying out more than 6,400 Cubans a month, for 19 months, were ordered to halt operations. An estimated 350,000 Cubans---many of whom had already paid for their passage and were waiting only for plane space---were locked in by the ban on emigration.

To be cut off from freedom----especially when freedom lies only a few tantalizing miles away----is a tragic fact of life affecting millions today in many parts of the globe. The tragedy is heightened when families are split----half in freedom, half behind walls. Many Cuban families, both inside and outside their native land, are suffering the agony which is so wide-spread in the world today.

I'm not going to repeat all the criticisms and complaints about the refugee influx that you've read in our local newspapers, or heard from your well-meaning neighbors and friends, or, may have actually been said by you, yourselves. Most of those I've read or heard, are based on pure fiction and prejudice----not upon hard, cold, facts.

It has been written and said that Cuban refugees are taking jobs away from needy Americans, and lowering the wage rates in Miami and South Florida. I'm sure that some of this has taken place, but the hard cold facts, available to all of you in the reports made by the Florida State Employment Service, the recent special survey on unemployment in Dade County conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, the First Research Corporation, and other professional fact finding bodies, proves conclusively that these inflammatory statements just can't be proved.

It has been written and said that the influx of Cuban refugees was increasing the crime rate in our communities, yet the official report of the Miami Police Department, released just a few months ago, says that although the crime rate during the past three years has increased in Miami - and here I quote from the report - "Cubans were not a problem in the crimes reported on by the Department." Lt. Tom Lipe, in making the report, said, "Cubans are good citizens as far as we are concerned."

It has been written and said that the influx of Cuban refugees would ruin South Florida's tourist industry. Yet industry reports show that 1962 was the best tourist year we ever experienced, and right now the tourist industry tells us that 1963 is going to be better than 1962.

It has been written and said that the influx of Cuban refugees would create slums and depress the real estate market. The most recent reports from the Miami Housing Authority, Area Redevelopment officials, the Mortgage Bankers Association, the Real Estate Appraisal Association and the Federal Housing Administration all agree that although there is an overcrowding situation no slums have been created and the real estate market, instead of being depressed, has been greatly helped by the influx of refugees into the area.

It has been written and said that the refugee influx would ruin our school system and slow up the education of our own children. The facts are available to all of you and you can get them by talking to the Superintendent of Schools, or any of the other responsible officials of the Dade County School system. You'll learn from them that there has been, and still is, heavy overcrowding, but that the quality of the Cuban students and the nine million dollars of federal funds that has been given to help with the problem has really improved, rather than hurt, the school system.

And finally, it has been written and said that "they are using all our welfare funds to help the Cubans instead of the needy Americans." The truth is that no Dade County or Florida State funds have ever been used for this purpose. More than eighty million dollars of purely federal funds, contributed in taxes by all the people of the United States including you and me, have been used to give these needy refugees asylum, safety and minimum subsistence in the greatest democracy the world has ever known.

The hard, cold facts, and the real truth of the situation, as stated by competent local officials in recent public hearings is that we in Dade County really don't have assistance programs that are worthy of the name. Although federal funds have been and are now available on a three to one matching basis for staff, and equal matching basis for general assistance --- this means that for every dollar we are willing to appropriate and spend for general assistance the federal government will give us three dollars for staff employment and a matching dollar for assistance payments --- notwithstanding the fact that such an offer remains open to us we cannot seem to get our own elected representatives to provide the one dollar that will automatically bring us matching funds to help the needy Americans in our own communities get back on their feet again.

Let's take a quick, short look at some of the plus factors, at some of the good that has resulted in the exodus of the Cuban refugee fleeing from Communism, tyranny and oppression to asylum, safety and democracy in the Miami area.

1. I contend that the culture of this area has advanced to a point it would have taken another 10 years to reach without this impact.

2. Miami has been striving for many years to establish its right to the title "Gateway to the Americas", and I can't believe that anyone in North, Central or South America would now attempt to dispute that claim.

3. All of the people of Latin and South America, and Islands of the Carribbean are completely aware of the tolerance, hospitality, understanding and welcome that the citizens of the Miami area have extended to the Cuban refugee.

4. Just think how our school teachers, Church people, policemen, Government agencies, sales people, service trades, Civic Organizations, Hotel people, and many of our citizens have learned to speak Spanish in order to deal with, serve and host our Spanish-speaking exiles and guests. The progress we've made in this area alone will bring us cultural, as well as economic rewards, for all the remaining years of our lives.

5. Our Churches and Temples have found a rallying point and popular cause, and have greatly strengthened their ties as a result.

6. All our educational and cultural discussion groups have benefited tremendously by their association with the Cuban exiles, and as a result have learned much, in such a short time, about Communism and how it works.

7. We're becoming world famous for our "Operation Amigo" project, and the Cuban refugee provided the bridge of understanding and stimulating spark which advanced the program.

Let's just look at the positive aspects of a few highlights you may not have thought about before:

1. Our Public School System, although over-burdened and badly crowded now, is being assisted by Federal expenditures to accelerate its rate of growth because of this heavy refugee load. When the refugee impact disappears, as it will in the not too distant future, we'll be just that much further advanced and better able to provide for the future expansion that must come to care for our future normal growth.

2. The success of Interama as a permanent Trade Fair is a foregone conclusion, because we've proven to all the countries of Latin America that Miami is a Host City to the Spanish-speaking world, without a peer to be found anywhere.

3. And last, but by no means least, the tremendous expenditure of Federal funds in this area, more than 36 million dollars last year, and somewhere in the neighborhood of 70 million this year, has bolstered Miami's sagging economy during a time which could have been one of depression and retrogression without such a dollar flow.

Miami, an area whose economic bloodstream is fed and nourished by tourist visitors, has always been happy to welcome the "Refugee" from the North who is fleeing from the cold weather.

Up to this time, the great majority of Miamians have also welcomed and tolerated the influx of refugees from Cuba, who are basically fleeing from Communism and oppression.

However, we are seeing a small minority begin to resent this influx. We are beginning to hear them say, "America for Americans", and, "Miami for Miamians".

Maybe we should remind them that almost everyone in Miami is from somewhere else, and that America has grown great because of its willingness to provide honest opportunities for immigrants and refugees.

Maybe we should remind them that we welcome the Cuban refugee because the bloodstream philosophy of America is inscribed on our Statue of Liberty, a statue which is known to the rest of the World as, "The Mother of Exiles".

Maybe we should rededicate ourselves to these words:

Give me your tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.

*It was unanimously
agreed to print this
brilliant speech in
recognition to Mister
Marshall Wise
for his wonderful
words in behalf
of the Cuban refugees.
Cuban Rotarians in exile*

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